

World to Vilnius: Suffer

WASHINGTON

When an individual becomes a dissident, he or she is seen by the outside world as a hero: a Sakharov or Mandela stirs the conscience of the world. But when a captive nation becomes a dissident, its resistance to oppression becomes an inconvenience to mankind; it is accused of being an impediment to the Big Picture, a threat to worshipers of the idol of Stability.

That is why European industrialists who insisted that the Kremlin would never use its natural-gas pipeline as a weapon are now so silent at the cutoff to Lithuania. (No mask can be worn to protect civilians against the cutoff of natural gas.)

That is why polls say American public opinion treats the reach for independence by the dissident nation to be an annoyance, preferring 2 to 1 that our President continue his policy of paying lip service to the Lithuanian assertion of longstanding independence — while supporting Gorbachev and protecting the summit meeting.

We have been sold a bill of goods. We are told that we have a great stake in the personal success of Mr. Gorbachev; that his success depends on his absolute control of the Kremlin; and that he would lose control to some neo-Stalinist faction if his freeing of Cen-

How to get the West to counter Gorby's no-gas attack.

tral European nations extended to the three Baltic republics which were grabbed a few years earlier.

The opposite is true. Our interest in Mr. Gorbachev is limited to his ability to withdraw troops from illegally seized nations and to speed the transition to political and economic freedom; his motive to make these reforms is rooted in the fear of the failed system's impending collapse; and by not putting a price on his reversion to command control, we remove a central impetus for the growth of democracy.

Does pressing Mr. Gorbachev to acknowledge the independence of the Baltic states really jeopardize, as White House backgrounders argue, our greater objective of troop withdrawal and missile reduction?

A minority think not. We believe that the West's toleration of his decision to make economic war on a conquered nation that now dares to assert its freedom is not merely morally wrong, but geopolitically unsound. It breaks the democratic momentum. Our failure to denounce the threat of "presidential rule" — the euphemism for dictatorship — bolsters the imperious inclinations of the Soviet strongman and undermines sensibly radical reformers.

But Mr. Bush, following isolationist public opinion in the U.S., and under the cloak of "consultation" with European leaders eager to abandon the idea of collective security, is temporizing. The great symbolic dish of the Bush White House kitchen has become the waffle.

In light of this tepid support, what should besieged Lithuanians do?

Negotiating in a vacuum is a non-starter. Offering concessions when the other side answers only with a blockade is taken as weakness rather than reasonableness. The cap of independence has been tossed over the wall; the declaration cannot be undeclared without abject surrender.

Counting on the West for help at the start is another mistake. Our nervous doves (worried about nuclear shakiness of a disintegrating Soviet Union) combine with our ultra-pragmatists (worried about a future charge of "Who lost Gorbachev?") to say: America has other fish to fry.

Armed revolt is not an option: as one Balt told me, "there are no hills here — we cannot do an Afghanistan."

What's left? Suffering and lamentation; sustained resistance and dramatically expressed resentment; refusal to be starved into submission.

Public suffering can be a powerful force, as individual dissidents have demonstrated. Freedom never comes easily, and rarely does it come from outside.

To prick the conscience of the world, Lithuanians will have to do more than line up cars at gas stations. They will have to parade their jobless, show the ravages of Gorbachev's blockade on their children, passively torment their oppressors and become the grim example of the failure of glasnost.

Moscow's no-gas attack is effective, as is occupiers' brutality, the takeover of printing plants and the imposition of a quisling prosecutor.

But relentless resistance in the cause of long-denied independence begets the shame of bystanders; growing shame changes public opinion; and rising outrage could force politicians to offer recognition, a sealift, serious countervailing economic pressure.

Mr. Gorbachev will set the Baltic nations free only if he must. The Balts, by their courage and willingness to suffer, can shame the world into making sure he must. □